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RUEHRC/DEPT OF AGRICULTURE WASHINGTON DC
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RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC
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SUBJ: Regional Food Security Symposium on Wheat Stem Rust

REF: Islamabad 1267

11. (U) Summary: The August 12-13 regional symposium on wheat stem rust in Islamabad offered Pakistani scientists a rare opportunity to focus international attention on Pakistan's need for greater investment in agricultural research. A comprehensive wheat action plan based on the symposium's recommendations is being prepared; priority GOP approval is expected. Once approved, the U.S. team will review the plan and identify areas where USG support might best be leveraged. A major development was a report of a new, local wheat rust strain in southern Pakistan that may be as virulent as Ug99. If confirmed this would be devastating setback for the international scientific coalition working to develop new Ug99-resistant varieties. USDA will coordinate with Pakistan scientists to send a sample of the new strain to the USDA Cereal Rust Laboratory in Minnesota for definitive analysis. End Summary.

12. (U) Islamabad FAS and ECON, in collaboration with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Pakistan National Agriculture Research Council (NARC), the International Centre for Wheat and Maize (CYMMIT), and the International Centre for Agriculture Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA) organized a regional food security symposium on wheat stem rust in Islamabad on August 12-13. Seventy five scientists from Pakistan, Afghanistan, United States, Australia, Iran and the international Durable Rust Resistance in Wheat Project (Gates Foundation) also participated in the symposium, which focused on developing a near-term, practical action plan for Pakistan and Afghanistan to protect wheat production from cereal rust.

13. (U) Although active participants in the Green Revolution, Pakistan scientists have been largely isolated from the international agricultural scientific community for the past two decades. Throughout the two-day event, Pakistan scientists made repeated appeals for reengagement with the world agricultural scientific community.

14. (U) This symposium was the first event organized under the Food Security Tri-Lateral Working Group targeting increased agricultural productivity. Officials from the Afghan Ministry of Agriculture had agreed to participate; however, their travel was cancelled at the last minute due to a GIROA-imposed ban in the run-up to the August 20 presidential elections.

15. (U) Pakistani scientists believed it was important to invite their counter-parts from Iran to the conference due to reported incidences of Ug99 in that country. Although no Iranian government officials accepted the invitation, two Iranian citizens did

participate, a representative from ICARDA (based in Aleppo, Syria) and a representative from CYMMIT (based in Tehran, Iran). The CYMMIT representative from Tehran engaged comfortably with USDA officials, informing them that the spread of Ug99 in Iran has been arrested by two-consecutive years of drought. Iranian government scientists regularly participate in Ug99 events hosted by CYMMIT at their headquarters in Mexico.

Background: What is Ug99 and Why is it a Threat?

¶6. (U) Wheat stem rusts are fungal pathogens that can block grain development and drastically reduce grain yield. Wheat breeders have bred wheat varieties resistant to wheat stem rusts for over 60 years. A new rust strain, Ug99, which can defeat most stem rust protective genes, appeared in East Africa in 1999 and made its way through the horn of Africa and into Iran. More than 80 percent of the world's wheat acreage is at risk from Ug99, including wheat production in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the United States. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has put Pakistan and Afghanistan on high alert following a report that Ug99 black wheat stem rust has moved into Iran. The August 12-13 symposium launched a coordinated effort to combat this potential threat to regional food security.

Strategies to Fight Ug99

¶7. (U) Scientists from the major wheat producing countries have joined forces with the international wheat breeding centers, CIMMYT (based in Mexico) and ICARDA (based in Syria) to develop new wheat

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varieties with Ug99-resistant genes, some of which were provided to countries near to Ug99-infected areas (including Pakistan) in 2009. More thoroughly resistant varieties are being developed, but there is concern Pakistan and Afghanistan (among other countries) are not evaluating and adopting new Ug99-resistant varieties fast enough.

New Rust Variety Discovered in Pakistan?

¶8. (U) The two-day workshop included presentations by international and Pakistan wheat improvement and cereal disease leaders, leaders in wheat genetics, as well as diverse breeders and pathologists from several provinces. Pakistani scientists reported a new, local wheat rust strain in southern Pakistan that may be as virulent as Ug99. This new strain reportedly killed the first field trial of CIMMYT's new Ug99 resistant wheat varieties. If confirmed this would be devastating setback for CIMMYT and the international scientific coalition, including USDA's efforts to develop new Ug99-resistant varieties. Although evidence of a new virulent rust strain was troubling, most workshop participants concluded that a more thorough assessment, according to world standards, must be done in the next growing season.

¶9. (U) There was some dissent, however, among the Pakistani scientific community about sending a sample of the putative new strain to the USDA Cereal Rust Laboratory, St. Paul, Minnesota, for definitive analysis (Note: The USDA lab is one of the few labs in the world with the scientific expertise and authorization to work with living rust samples. End Note). Many Pakistani scientists dislike being overly dependent on the international centers, CIMMYT and ICARDA, to develop their new wheat varieties and to analyze new threats. They think that broad international use of common CIMMYT varieties makes Pakistan vulnerable to new wheat disease threats. As noted by ICARDA's Dr. A. Mujid, Pakistan could readily increase wheat production by 200 percent (2 to 4.5 metric tons per hectare) with a combination of improved seeds and adoption of better agronomy/management practices by farmers. The Pakistani leaders noted that over 60 percent of Pakistanis are farmers so increased crop productivity would have a major impact. These concerns underscored a common theme at the workshop that Pakistan needs to strengthen its wheat improvement programs to increase wheat productivity and protection.

Next Steps

¶10. (U) The GOP delegation is developing a wheat action plan and has promised to share the plan with USDA/Islamabad. The USDA and USAID Islamabad team also identified the following priority needs based on recommendations from Pakistan and other international leaders: 1) Surveillance/Monitoring/Cereal Rust Expertise; 2) Plant Breeding Program; 3) Seed Program; 4) Agronomic practices; and 5) Extension Hubs. Following receipt of the Pakistan plan, the USG team will identify those areas where USG support could be best leveraged.

PATTERSON